

Task Force Battle Drills

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Most tankers associate battle drills with platoon level operations. They are a method for executing tactical tasks with a minimum amount of planning and reaction time. Upon contact with an enemy, a platoon leader or platoon sergeant immediately determines what must be done and makes a decision, and the platoon rapidly executes. The decision-making process at this level takes only as long as is needed to issue the order, "Action Right!" Becoming expert at executing battle drills requires time and repetitive practice on the part of the platoon, but can make the difference between victory and defeat on the battlefield.

Battalion task forces also face time constraints and must rapidly execute certain tactical tasks. Though planning time is greater than at the platoon level, it is never enough. Task forces routinely use too much of the available time in the decision-making process (DMP). The task force OPORD is often a collection of good ideas cobbled together by the staff to satisfy an O/C checklist. It is too long and disjointed to serve as a unifying and synchronizing device for the commander and his subordinate units. It is often based on a situational template of the enemy and not upon confirmed intelligence. Even when time is well used by the task force planners, units often fail because they haltingly execute the plan differently every time, never gaining the skill that comes with repetition.

"Action Right!" will not work as the DMP for a task force, but the process can be abbreviated and focused by the commander so the unit can rapidly plan, rehearse and execute its actions. Task force missions are more complex than those of platoons, but they can also be narrowed down to a small number that can be repetitively practiced. This article proposes a way to adopt the concept of battle drills to task force level operations to correct some of the failures frequently seen at the CTCs.

In the fall of 1998, the Steel Tigers of Task Force 1-77 AR, (2nd Bde, 1st ID, the Big Red One), were highly suscepti-

ble to the risks all battalions face at the CTCs. All five company commanders, the XO, and the commander were newly assigned to their positions and had neither planned an operation nor maneuvered together before. Only the S3 had been in position during the previous Combat Maneuver Training Center (CMTC) rotation. With less than three months before "going into the box" against the CMTC's OPFOR, 1-4 INF, we looked for a way to overcome some of our disadvantages. Task force level battle drills made the difference for 1-77 Armor.¹

We foresaw three potential advantages to TF battle drills. First, they would save the commander and staff valuable time in the DDMP. Less time would be required to issue commander's guidance, to develop and issue warning orders, to develop the TF execution matrix and to synchronize the operations order (OPORD). Second, battle drills would also save the task force planning time and allow subordinate units to begin preparing for the mission before the OPORD was issued. Subordinate leaders could then begin their own planning; units could begin moving and rehearsing their own battle drills; CSS assets could begin their actions, etc. Finally, we expected battle drills to pay off during mission execution as key leaders of the task force, familiar with the battle drill, could quickly execute their part of the mission while staying within the commander's intent.

The process of developing these battle drills was as important as the drills themselves. We developed them over a period of two months during weekly "skull sessions." Task force leaders, from platoon sergeant on up, spent one afternoon each week developing each drill. The S2 began these weekly sessions by presenting his terrain analysis, enemy composition, and enemy courses of action for that mission. His analysis was based upon a thorough analysis of the terrain at the CMTC in Hohenfels, Germany. The S2 shop also spent significant time analyzing CMTC OPFOR doctrine and trends. The S3 fol-

lowed with a possible TF organization and short discussion of key tenets of each mission.

At this point, either the commander, S3, or XO presented a possible tactical solution to the mission to start the discussion. Noncommissioned and commissioned officers then conducted a free-flowing discussion or debate about the merits of proposed solutions. Various solutions were developed on butcher paper as the discussion went on. The XO facilitated the discussion while the S3-Air recorded ideas and sketches for all to see. It took some finesse to focus the discussion without stifling the free flow of ideas from all ranks.

A key aspect of the process was including all of the TF attachments and not just the TF leadership. Not only did they get used to working with the battalion before showing up "in the box" to join us, but we got the advantage of their BOS-specific expertise in developing the battle drills. The commander and S3 kept the discussion from wandering too far from their concepts of warfighting. That concept included three major tenets: battle drills, decision point tactics, and recon pull tactics.

The enemy always has a "vote" in combat, a factor that many units ignore at their peril. Using the concept of decision point tactics,² we also built flexibility into each of our battle drills. Task forces must routinely begin the DMP with little or no knowledge of the enemy, save a situation template (SITEMP). Just prior to or during execution, units discover that the enemy isn't fighting according to the template and hence the task force plan is worthless. Task forces often fight the plan instead of the enemy, and lose, because they have planned no alternatives and/or could not coherently execute a poorly synchronized FRAGO.

Each of our drills had at least one branch that allowed the task force to react to an enemy that did not fight as expected. The base task force plan dealt with the most likely enemy COA, but

Task Force Battle Drill: Sample Execution Matrix for Movement to Contact

UNIT & BOS / PHASE	Initial Set Across LD	FP/FSE Battle			Advance Guard Battle		
ENEMY COA	1 CRP (1/2 mix) on 3 AAs	FP/FSE on AA North	FP/FSE on AA Center	FP/FSE on AA South	AGMB on AA North	AGMB on AA Center	AGMB on AA South
DECISION PT & CRITERIA	None	#1 - > 3 tanks on AA N	#1 - > 3 tanks on AA C	#1 - > 3 tanks on AA S	#2 - > 9 BMPs on AA N	#2 - > 9 BMPs on AA C	#2 - > 9 BMPs on AA S
FRIENDLY COA	"Tiger Prowl"	"Hold North"	"Hold Center"	"Hold South"	"Tiger North"	"Tiger Center"	"Tiger South"
Recon	Move with lead CO/TMs on each axis	Recon forward on Axis Sherman & Buford to find AGMB	Recon forward on Axis Grant & Buford to find AGMB	Recon forward on Axis Grant & Sherman to find AGMB	Lead D CO to AGMB; keep eyes on AGMB & locate MOD/AT PLT	Lead C CO to AGMB; keep eyes on AGMB & locate MOD/AT PLT	Lead D CO to AGMB; keep eyes on AGMB & locate MOD/AT PLT
TMA	Attack along Axis Grant from LD to PL Rhine; destroy CRP	Hasty D vic CP 1 to defeat FP/FSE	NC	NC	Continue hasty def to defeat AGMB fwd of PL Meuse	ABF vic CP 2 to assist TM B & defeat AGMB	Attack behind D CO from CP 44 – 47 – 50 to destroy AGMB
TM B	Attack along Axis Sherman from LD to PL Rhine; destroy CRP	NC	Hasty D vic CP 11 to defeat FP/FSE	NC	ABF vic CP 2 to assist TM A & defeat AGMB	Continue hasty def to defeat AGMB fwd of PL Meuse	ABF vic CP 31 to assist C CO & defeat AGMB
C CO	Attack along Axis Buford from LD to PL Rhine; destroy CRP	NC	NC	Hasty D vic CP 21 to defeat FP/FSE	Attack behind D CO from CP 3 – 6 – 9 to destroy AGMB	Attack from CP 4 – 7 – 10 to destroy AGMB	Continue hasty def to defeat AGMB fwd of PL Meuse
D CO	Follow on Axis Sherman as TF Reserve	NC	LOA is PL Thomas	NC	Attack from CP 4 – 7 – 10 to destroy AGMB	Attack behind C CO from CP 3 – 6 – 9 to destroy AGMB	Attack from CP 44 – 47 – 50 to destroy AGMB
FIRES	POF to TM B	Suppress FSE POF to TM A	Suppress FSE POF to TM B	Suppress FSE POF to C CO	Suppress AGMB POF to TM A	Suppress AGMB POF to TM B	Suppress AGMB POF to C CO
M/CM/S	Volcano move w/ Res. AVL M move w/ D CO	NC	NC	NC	Volcano to TM A AVL M to D CO	Volcano to TM B AVL M to C CO	Volcano to C CO AVL M to D CO
NBC	Smk move with Reserve	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC
	Decon move with CTCP	Move to CP 25	Move to CP 35	Move to CP 45	BPT est. hasty decon site vic CP 25	BPT est. hasty decon site vic CP 35	BPT est. hasty decon site vic CP 45
CSS	CTCP& III/V Pkg. follow Res. on Axis Sherman	NC	NC	NC	NC	Move to Axis Buford vic CP 43	NC
	UMCP move on Axis Grant to CP 24	Vic CP 24	Vic CP 24	Vic CP 24	Vic CP 24 BPT move fwd to CP 44	Vic CP 24 BPT move fwd to CP 44	Vic CP 24 BPT move fwd to CP 44
C3	CDR w/ D CO	NC	NC	NC	CDR w/ D CO	CDR to C CO	CDR w/ D CO
	S3 w/ TM B	S3 to TM A	S3 w/ TM B	S3 to C CO	S3 w/ TM A	S3 w/ TM B	S3 w/ C CO
	TOC vic 123456	NC	NC	NC	TOC move to 234567	TOC move to 234567	TOC move to 234667

NOTE: This matrix demonstrates how a Task Force battle drill which uses Decision Point and Recon Pull tactics can be portrayed on a simple matrix as part of an OPORD. It does not represent a "tactical solution" to a specific situation nor does it fully cover all units and BOSs.

branches were developed to deal with less likely courses of action. The commander, S2, S3, and XO developed decision points (DP) and their associated criteria and tied them to each branch. During rehearsals the TF paid particular attention to these DPs and branches. We gave each branch of a plan a name or title that would be easy to transmit and understand on a crowded command net during the battle. Every leader knew that the

branch to be executed would not be determined until the enemy disposition or actions were confirmed. Task force reconnaissance assets were directed to find the intelligence needed to execute one or the other branch.

The concept of recon pull tactics is the necessary complement to decision point tactics and was the other integral part of our task force battle drills.³ Current

MDMP doctrine locates most of the process before the OPORD is written and before the operation begins. Units spend too long in MDMP before the LD, plan no branches or sequels, and thus have no flexibility once the operation begins.

Recon pull tactics extend MDMP throughout the planning and execution of an operation. Recon pull uses knowledge gained by the reconnaissance fight to

literally “pull” the task force along favorable routes towards the enemy, a weak point, and/or the objective. The commander must focus reconnaissance assets, in space and in time, on those critical things he must know to make those decisions required by his plan. It ensures the unit fights the enemy as he really is, not the SITEMP the S2 developed 48 hours prior to LD.

The conduct of a battle is thus a product of multiple decisions made by the commander who selects branches of a base plan using actual knowledge of the enemy’s actions gained by reconnaissance. The commander is assisted in making these decisions by the staff as it synchronizes the plan’s branches during the DMP and tracks the battle during execution. The execution matrix in the TF OPOD then incorporates the decision support matrix into one product.⁴ All this requires flexibility by leaders of the task force, timely and tightly focused reconnaissance efforts, and thorough knowledge of the task force battle drills.⁵

In separate sessions, the commander and staff met to form their own “battle drills” for the DMP. The purpose of these sessions was to develop an abbreviated decision-making process to support each of the battle drills. The commander’s marching orders for the staff was to minimize planning time and maximize rehearsal and subordinate unit preparation time. Our process was commander driven, not staff driven. This limited time for the staff to present “good ideas” to the commander or to develop the “perfect” plan, but it significantly reduced time spent in the DMP. In these sessions we consciously modified and abbreviated the DMP and came to a clear understanding of the responsibilities of the TF commander and the staff.

We reaped some unexpected benefits from these two processes. First, they forced us to break from the day-to-day routine of running a battalion and focus on warfighting (something for which there never seems to be enough time). Secondly, the staff and subordinate commanders learned the “heart” of their commander regarding warfighting and the commander better understood his staff’s capabilities. That mutual understanding proved beneficial when one or the other was temporarily unavailable during the rotation. Thirdly, the executors of any plan, from platoon sergeants to

unit commanders and attached platoons, became familiar with the commander’s ideas about warfighting. Finally, since the development of the battle drills was a group process, the need to teach or learn the drills was minimal; they were already embedded in key leaders’ minds.

TF 1-77 developed five TF battle drills to prepare for our rotation to the CMTC, two for the deliberate attack, one for the movement to contact, and two for the deliberate defense. Each drill included a task organization, a mission statement, a commander’s intent, a scheme of maneuver, a concept of logistics and an abbreviated DMP. We used a concept sketch with each battle drill to help visualize the plan. The battle drills gave us about a 60 percent to 75 percent “solution” to the plan. In effect, each was a mini-OPOD that we could quickly tailor, using METT-T, to a particular tactical situation that we expected to face during our rotation.

Some leaders were concerned that the battle drills were focused too narrowly on the specifics of a CMTC rotation and that they would not be useful at other times and places. The CMTC battlefield is much different from the NTC battlefield, to say nothing of Bosnia, Korea, or Iraq. Though our focus was indeed narrow, we decided that our only known “war” was going to be at the CMTC, against the 1-4 INF OPFOR, and in fall weather. To that end, we focused our training on a specific enemy, in a specific area of operations, at a specific time of year. We would do the same if notified to deploy for a real-world mission; to not do so seems foolhardy. Additionally, many principles and the development process are applicable no matter where we might fight.⁶

We rejected tasking specific companies and platoons to train on specific tasks in our battle drills. For example, A Company could have been specified as the breach unit in the deliberate breach with B Company as the support by fire unit and C Company as the assault unit, etc. This might have generated a higher level of proficiency among subordinate units of the TF on certain tasks. A unit that knows it will always be the breach company in the attack and the counterattack company in the defense can narrow its METL and training plan. The risk, however, is loss of flexibility at the company and TF levels. We did not do this prior to the rotation due to uncertainty about our task organization and to maintain flexibility. It

might, however, be well suited to other times and places.

We tested and refined the drills during multiple computer simulation exercises prior to beginning our rotation. Of course, no simulation can tell you if a plan will succeed or fail, but they did give us the opportunity to practice, refine, and become more familiar with our drills. Luckily the CMTC process puts a unit through two different, 24 day simulation exercises 1-2 months prior to a unit’s rotation.⁷ Once we were satisfied with each drill, it became part of our TACSOP. The TF TACSOP was not new reading or a BDU pocket weight; it was truly a combat multiplier.

In the limited time we had available, the TF focused its training to suit the battle drills. Scouts could focus their training on the kinds of reconnaissance missions they would be called upon to execute. The Fire Support Officer knew the commander’s intent for fires in each type of mission and could develop his plan accordingly. The attached engineer company commander knew his role in the deliberate breach. Tank and infantry companies and their platoons could practice their own battle drills knowing which ones would most likely be used.

These battle drills proved to be very successful during our CMTC rotation. Naturally, none of our plans looked exactly like the battle drill from which it was derived. To those of us in the TF, however, each plan’s heritage was evident. The DMP gave subordinate units time to prepare for each mission. More than once, key leaders were killed, yet the battle drills worked as subordinate leaders took charge and operated within the commander’s intent. Attached units were smoothly integrated into the TF and performed their tasks well. The commander was able to make sound decisions based on actual knowledge of the enemy and see the task force quickly execute well synchronized branches of the base plan.

Upon receipt of the initial warning orders from brigade, we determined which of our battle drills would be appropriate to the follow mission. Our WARNO #1 was then issued. Once the brigade OPOD was received, the TF S2, S3 and commander would huddle together, select a battle drill, and begin planning. The commander’s initial guidance, usually issued over FM radio, went something like this: “We are conducting a defense in

sector, use the Tiger Strike battle drill against the enemy's most likely COA. Develop one friendly COA, but develop two branches to deal with two less likely enemy COAs. Task organize per the battle drill with A Company in the north in an economy of force, B TM as the counter recon force, D TM defending the BP in center sector, and C Company as the CATK force from the south."⁸ I'm enroute to the TOC, ETA 30 minutes. Brief me on mission analysis 30 minutes after my arrival."

After the mission analysis briefing, the commander would issue his commander's intent and planning guidance by BOS, to further define his concept for the next mission. Warning order #2 was issued 30 minutes after synchronizing the plan. It would specify the task force battle drill to use for the upcoming mission and set the task organization. Each element of the TF then had a pretty solid idea of the tasks it would be called upon to execute and could begin to prepare for the upcoming battle. OPORDs were easier and faster to produce. They were also easier to understand as commanders were already familiar with the concepts underlying the plan. The battle drill concept also helped focus TF rehearsals on critical events instead of every detail of the operation.

The concepts of Recon-Pull and Decision Point Tactics, embedded in our battle drills, facilitated rapid and accurate decision making by the commander in a plan with multiple branches. Occasionally, a branch of the OPORD was eliminated, or confirmed, prior to the task force rehearsal if the results of the recon fight had already come in. Other times, those decision points were not reached until after the rehearsal but before we crossed the LD. In the movement to contact, branches were not decided upon until we gained knowledge of the enemy actions during the battle. In the later two cases, a simple and brief call over the command net by the commander such as "Scouts confirm Axis Blue is lightly defended, decision point three has been reached, execute branch Tiger North," was enough to redirect the TF towards success.

While battle drills are normally associated with tank platoons, the Steel Tigers of 1-77 AR adopted the idea to the battalion level operations with success. TF battle drills are very much commander, not staff, driven. They are suited to a par-

ticular enemy and battlefield. The process of developing battle drills also engages the leadership of the task force and aids in perfecting their execution. The modified DMP allows the TF XO to focus the staff in support of the commander's intent and give subordinate units the time they need to plan and prepare.

With unlimited time, perfect intelligence, an expert staff, and units trained to a razor's edge, better solutions to tactical missions can usually be found and executed. When the enemy SITEMP can be confirmed before the battle begins and the enemy sits passively by as we execute our plan, the more traditional DDMP with a single "best" COA might work. On a time-constrained battlefield, and against a thinking enemy, this doctrine needs some revision. Task force battle drills, based upon recon pull and decision point tactics, are such a revision.

Notes

¹The stimulus for TF battle drills originated in the fertile mind of COL Patrick J. Flynn, then commander of 5-77 AR, 3rd Bde, 1st AD, Mannheim, Germany (later 1-32 AR, 3rd Bde, 2nd ID, Ft. Lewis, Wash.), from 1993 to 1995.

²CPT Jim Crider and LTC Pete Palmer, "Decision Point Tactics: Fighting the Enemy, Not the Plan," *CTC Quarterly Bulletin*, No. 97-4, Jan 97, Ft. Leavenworth, Kan.: Center for Army Lessons Learned, 1997, pp. I-1 to IV-24.

³COL William Betson, Doctrine Division, DTDD, USAARMC, "Reconnaissance Pull." Seminar taught at the Armor Pre-Command Course in March 1998, Ft. Knox, Ky.

⁴Crider and Palmer, "Decision Point Tactics," p. IV-15.

⁵BLUEFOR units at the CTC units are usually defeated by the OPFOR using the principles of recon pull and decision point tactics. It seems that 15+ years of being soundly beaten at the hands of the OPFOR ought to tell us something besides the fact that we need more training!

⁶When this article was submitted to *ARMOR* for publication, 1-77 AR was again developing battle drills as it prepared for deployment to Kuwait for Exercise Intrinsic Action 99-02 this spring.

⁷This process should preferably be done earlier, to allow more time for refinement, but we did not have that option.

⁸The "Tiger Strike" battle drill included one company defending in sector, one company defending a BP, one company as a CATK force, and one company conducting the counter-recon mission, then joining the CATK force.

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MAJ Curt Lapham was commissioned in Armor in 1983 from Michigan State. He served as a platoon leader and company XO with 364 Armor in Schweinfurt, Germany; as commander, C Trp, 1/12 Cavalry and squadron XO, 2/12 Cav at Ft. Knox, Ky.; as commander, A Co, 2-35 Armor at Ft. Carson, Colo.; and as G3 planner for 1st ID and battalion XO of 1-77 Armor in Schweinfurt. Currently, he is the S3, 2nd Brigade, 1st ID.

LTC Tim Reese currently is the commander of 1-77 Armor "Steel Tigers," 2nd Bde, 1st ID in Schweinfurt, Germany. Previous assignments include company XO, 1-8 Cav, 1st CD at Ft. Hood, Texas; commander, D Company and HHC, 4-67 AR, 3AD in Friedberg, Germany; S3 and XO of the 1-32 AR, 2nd ID, Ft. Lewis, Wash.; and operations officer in the Operations Directorate of the U.S. European Command in Stuttgart, Germany. The 1-77 AR Steel Tigers are currently deployed to Kuwait for Operation Intrinsic Action 99-02.